

Balancing Development and Ecological Justice in the DRC

Critical Minerals or Critical Externalities in the developing world

Dr. Toussaint M. Kafarhire, S.J., PhD

*For presentation at Toronto Metropolitan University Corporate Social
Responsibility Institute “in conversation” session, June 15, 2026*

1. Introduction: the Transition Paradox

- Demand for critical minerals is rising
- Africa holds strategic resources
- Green transition risks reproducing colonial extraction

**living through multiple
*transitions!***

“We are living through a rapid phase of transition, a **“change of era,”** in which — *while some are vying for the future of new technologies and others dedicate themselves to reflecting on the matter* — **most people are watching and waiting, observing from afar and merely hoping for the best.** For this very reason, crucial questions impose themselves on our conscience and can no longer be avoided: Where are we going? Toward what goal do we wish to orient ourselves? What direction should we choose as a people and as a human community?”

(Magnifica Humanitas, #6.)

Some among these transitions include...

1. The Green Transition:

An important shift to use **renewable and low-carbon energy**, **instead of traditional fossil fuels** such as coal, oil, gas that contribute to the Climate Change.

2. The Climate Transition:

As we now face rising temperatures, water stress, the collapse in biodiversity, and forms of migration due to climate disruptions (drought, floods, crops, rising sea levels – i.e., Vanuatu lady at COP30!

3. The Digital Transition:

Watching what is happening in the digitization of life, with rise of AI, robotics, big data and democracy based on algorithms, not freedoms, the question becomes: Will technology empower humanity—or deepen surveillance and inequality?

4. The Geopolitical Transition:

“When China rules the world” by Martin Jacques. China’s rise will not simply make it another Western-style superpower, but will reshape the global order according to its own civilizational values, political traditions, and cultural influence.



- These “transitions” are not merely a slogan: when we get to visit your countries in the Global North, we realize how much these transitions are real, and benefiting a smaller fraction of humanity: they heavily depend on critical minerals extracted from developing countries such as the DRC in Africa, Peru, in Latin America, Myanmar or Indonesia in Asia.



2. My Core Argument

- *The discourse of sustainability often obscures deeply unequal costs, raising the unsettling possibility that frameworks such as the MDGs and SDGs were constructed on shifting sands.*
- While benefits largely accrue to industrialized nations, Africa absorbs ecological and human costs.



3. The Human and Ecological Cost of Extraction

“The transition cannot be called ‘green’ if mining communities are left behind.”

The DRC supplies strategic minerals essential for:

Electric vehicles;

Renewable energy;

Digital technologies.

However:

Communities often remain poor despite immense mineral wealth.

Water sources are contaminated.

Forests and agricultural lands are degraded;

Artisanal miners face precarious conditions.

Women and children are disproportionately affected.



Some illustration...

- CARF is now focusing on a case to preserve Lubusha High School in Haut-Katanga, a key historic institution vital for educating Congolese women leaders and part of the national heritage. *Yet, nearby mining activities within 50 meters pose significant structural, environmental, and health risks.*



Bearing the negative externalities are the weaker and the poorer communities...

This reality raises a crucial question: the transition for whom?

*If the benefits of this transition accrue primarily to industrialized economies, while the human, social, and environmental costs are borne by vulnerable populations, then it is not a genuine transition, **but rather a perpetuation of structural injustices.***



4. Development theoretical frameworks

Development is often presented as a universal, neutral, and never-ending process of growth, measured through industrialization, economic growth, or technological advancement.

- **Progress and the Dependency theory**
- **Critique of neoliberal globalization**
- **Capabilities approach (Amartya Sen)**
- **Postcolonial theory**

The dominant development paradigm has paved the way for slavery, colonization, and postcolonial dependency, exclusion, and ecological exploitation.

Critics contend that Africa's integration into the global capitalist system, which has largely benefited industrialized nations while locking African economies into the role of raw-material exporters (Samir Amin)

- Development

The purpose of development is, indeed, human flourishing: *substantively understood as freedoms and opportunities to lead a life that people have reason to value.* the capabilities approach refers what people are actually able to do and to be! (Amartya Sen and Marta Nusbaum)

- National responsibility and global justice

For David Miller in *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, global justice isn't just an extension of social justice worldwide. Nations, instead, are distinct moral communities *with specific obligations to their members, so we owe more to our citizens than to all humanity.* However, he recognizes universal duties like protecting human rights and aiding the poor. He promotes a middle ground between cosmopolitanism, advocating universal equality, and nationalism, *focusing responsibilities within borders. Yet,* global justice should include both national solidarity and universal responsibilities.

- Charles Beitz’s “Cosmopolitanism and Global Justice” advocates a **cosmopolitan** view: **individuals**, not nations, are the moral focus. Justice principles, therefore, should extend beyond borders.

The global energy transition, while urgent, cannot be considered equitable in the face of the climate crisis and the environmental and social damage caused by the scramble for critical minerals. It cannot continue to rely on the asymmetrical exploitation of resources in the Global South, particularly cobalt, copper, coltan, and lithium.

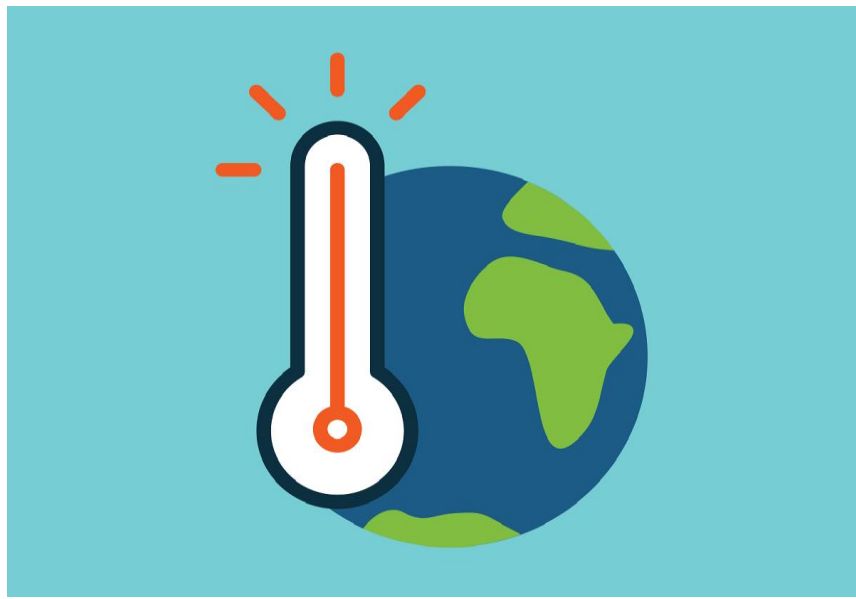
- We, therefore, calls for a transition – whether energy or digital – based not only on technological progress, but also on human dignity, community participation, social justice, and ethical governance of natural resources.

5. Why should this Conversation Matter to Us?

*The Future
of
humanity is
at stake!*

- Environmental degradation;
- Displacement and poverty;
- Unsafe labor conditions;
- Weak governance;
- Gender-based vulnerabilities;
- Limited participation in decision-making.





- In his recently issued Encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (May 25, 2026, # 35), Pope Leo XIV revisits the teachings of his predecessor, Saint Paul VI, concerning development (See his Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* of 26 March 1967, #14) and underscores the importance of focusing our understanding of development *on preserving the humanity of each and all individuals, as well as protecting their communities as places for growth.*



- In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI “*described development as a transition from less humane to more humane living conditions.*”
- Furthermore, he argued that development is “as a process that concerns “each person and the whole person,” that is, every dimension of the person and all people without exception.
- Understood in this way, development “is in reality ‘the new name for peace,’” because *it aims to eradicate the roots of injustice and conflict and create opportunities for a more dignified life for all.*